

The Bull *Romanus Pontifex* (Nicholas V), January 8, 1455.

Background

The kingdoms of Portugal and Castile had been jockeying for position and possession of colonial territories along the African coast for more than a century prior to Columbus' "discovery" of lands in the western seas. On the theory that the Pope was an arbitrator between nations, each kingdom had sought and obtained Papal bulls at various times to bolster its claims, on the grounds that its activities served to spread Christianity.

The bull *Romanus Pontifex* is an important example of the Papacy's claim to spiritual lordship of the whole world and of its role in regulating relations among Christian princes and between Christians and "unbelievers" ("heathens" and "infidels"). This bull became the basis for Portugal's later claim to lands in the "new world," a claim which was countered by Castile and the bull [*Inter caetera*](#) in 1493.

An English translation of *Romanus Pontifex* is reproduced below, as published in *European Treaties bearing on the History of the United States and its Dependencies to 1648*, Frances Gardiner Davenport, editor, Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1917, Washington, D.C., at pp. 20-26. The original text in Latin is in the same volume, at pp. 13-20.

English Translation

Nicholas, bishop, servant of the servants of God. for a perpetual remembrance.

The Roman pontiff, successor of the key-bearer of the heavenly kingdom and vicar of Jesus Christ, contemplating with a father's mind all the several climes of the world and the characteristics of all the nations dwelling in them and seeking and desiring the salvation of all, wholesomely ordains and disposes upon careful deliberation those things which he sees will be agreeable to the Divine Majesty and by which he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls. This we believe will more certainly come to pass, through the aid of the Lord, if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith, as we know by the evidence of facts, not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us, and subject them to their own temporal dominion, sparing no labor and expense, in order that those kings and princes, relieved of all obstacles, may be the more animated to the prosecution of so salutary and laudable a work.

We have lately heard, not without great joy and gratification, how our beloved son, the noble personage Henry, infante of Portugal, uncle of our most dear son in Christ, the illustrious Alfonso, king of the kingdoms of Portugal and Algarve, treading in the footsteps of John, of famous memory, king of the said kingdoms, his father, and greatly inflamed with zeal for the salvation of souls and with fervor of faith, as a Catholic and true soldier of Christ, the Creator of all things, and a most active and courageous defender and intrepid champion of the faith in Him, has aspired from his early youth with his utmost might to cause the most glorious name of the said Creator to be published, extolled, and revered throughout the whole world, even in the most

remote and undiscovered places, and also to bring into the bosom of his faith the perfidious enemies of him and of the life-giving Cross by which we have been redeemed, namely the Saracens and all other infidels whatsoever, [and how] after the city of Ceuta, situated in Africa, had been subdued by the said King John to his dominion, and after many wars had been waged, sometimes in person, by the said infante, although in the name of the said King John, against the enemies and infidels aforesaid, not without the greatest labors and expense, and with dangers and loss of life and property, and the slaughter of very many of their natural subjects, the said infante being neither enfeebled nor terrified by so many and great labors, dangers, and losses, but growing daily more and more zealous in prosecuting this his so laudable and pious purpose, has peopled with orthodox Christians certain solitary islands in the ocean sea, and has caused churches and other pious places to be there founded and built, in which divine service is celebrated. Also by the laudable endeavor and industry of the said infante, very many inhabitants or dwellers in divers islands situated in the said sea, coming to the knowledge of the true God, have received holy baptism, to the praise and glory of God, the salvation of the souls of many, the propagation also of the orthodox faith, and the increase of divine worship.

Moreover, since, some time ago, it had come to the knowledge of the said infante that never, or at least not within the memory of men, had it been customary to sail on this ocean sea toward the southern and eastern shores, and that it was so unknown to us westerners that we had no certain knowledge of the peoples of those parts, believing that he would best perform his duty to God in this matter, if by his effort and industry that sea might become navigable as far as to the Indians who are said to worship the name of Christ, and that thus he might be able to enter into relation with them, and to incite them to aid the Christians against the Saracens and other such enemies of the faith, and might also be able forthwith to subdue certain gentile or pagan peoples, living between, who are entirely free from infection by the sect of the most impious Mahomet, and to preach and cause to be preached to them the unknown but most sacred name of Christ, strengthened, however, always by the royal authority, he has not ceased for twenty-five years past to send almost yearly an army of the peoples of the said kingdoms with the greatest labor, danger, and expense, in very swift ships called caravels, to explore the sea and coast lands toward the south and the Antarctic pole. And so it came to pass that when a number of ships of this kind had explored and taken possession of very many harbors, islands, and seas, they at length came to the province of Guinea, and having taken possession of some islands and harbors and the sea adjacent to that province, sailing farther they came to the mouth of a certain great river commonly supposed to be the Nile, and war was waged for some years against the peoples of those parts in the name of the said King Alfonso and of the infante, and in it very many islands in that neighborhood were subdued and peacefully possessed, as they are still possessed together with the adjacent sea. Thence also many Guineamen and other negroes, taken by force, and some by barter of unprohibited articles, or by other lawful contract of purchase, have been sent to the said kingdoms. A large number of these have been converted to the Catholic faith, and it is hoped, by the help of divine mercy, that if such progress be continued with them, either those peoples will be converted to the faith or at least the souls of many of them will be gained for Christ.

But since, as we are informed, although the king and infante aforesaid (who with so many and so great dangers, labors, and expenses, and also with loss of so many natives of their said kingdoms, very many of whom have perished in those expeditions, depending only upon the aid of those natives, have caused those provinces to be explored and have acquired and possessed such harbors, islands, and seas, as aforesaid, as the true lords of them), fearing lest strangers induced by covetousness should sail to those parts, and desiring to usurp to themselves the perfection, fruit, and praise of this work, or at least to hinder it, should therefore, either for the sake of gain or through malice, carry or transmit iron, arms, wood used for construction, and other things and goods prohibited to be carried to infidels or should teach those infidels the art of navigation, whereby they would become more powerful and obstinate enemies to the king and infante, and the prosecution of this enterprise would either be hindered, or would perhaps entirely fail, not without great offense to God and great reproach to all Christianity, to prevent this and to conserve their right and

possession, [the said king and infante] under certain most severe penalties then expressed, have prohibited and in general have ordained that none, unless with *their* sailors and ships and on payment of a certain tribute and with an express license previously obtained from the said king or infante, should presume to sail to the said provinces or to trade in their ports or to fish in the sea, [although the king and infante have taken this action, yet in time it might happen that persons of other kingdoms or nations, led by envy, malice, or covetousness, might presume, contrary to the prohibition aforesaid, without license and payment of such tribute, to go to the said provinces, and in the provinces, harbors, islands, and sea, so acquired, to sail, trade, and fish; and thereupon between King Alfonso and the infante, who would by no means suffer themselves to be so trifled with in these things, and the presumptuous persons aforesaid, very many hatreds, rancors, dissensions, wars, and scandals, to the highest offense of God and danger of souls, probably might and would ensue -- We [therefore] weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso -- to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit -- by having secured the said faculty, the said King Alfonso, or, by his authority, the aforesaid infante, justly and lawfully has acquired and possessed, and doth possess, these islands, lands, harbors, and seas, and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his successors, nor without special license from King Alfonso and his successors themselves has any other even of the faithful of Christ been entitled hitherto, nor is he by any means now entitled lawfully to meddle therewith -- in order that King Alfonso himself and his successors and the infante may be able the more zealously to pursue and may pursue this most pious and noble work, and most worthy of perpetual remembrance (which, since the salvation of souls, increase of the faith, and overthrow of its enemies may be procured thereby, we regard as a work wherein the glory of God, and faith in Him, and His commonwealth, the Universal Church, are concerned) in proportion as they, having been relieved of all the greater obstacles, shall find themselves supported by us and by the Apostolic See with favors and graces -- we, being very fully informed of all and singular the premises, do, *motu proprio*, not at the instance of King Alfonso or the infante, or on the petition of any other offered to us on their behalf in respect to this matter, and after mature deliberation, by apostolic authority, and from certain knowledge, in the fullness of apostolic power, by the tenor of these presents decree and declare that the aforesaid letters of faculty (the tenor whereof we wish to be considered as inserted word for word in these presents, with all and singular the clauses therein contained) are extended to Ceuta and to the aforesaid and all other acquisitions whatsoever, even those acquired before the date of the said letters of faculty, and to all those provinces, islands, harbors, and seas whatsoever, which hereafter, in the name of the said King Alfonso and of his successors and of the infante, in those parts and the adjoining, and in the more distant and remote parts, can be acquired from the hands of infidels or pagans, and that they are comprehended under the said letters of faculty. And by force of those and of the present letters of faculty the acquisitions already made, and what hereafter shall happen to be acquired, after they shall have been acquired, we do by the tenor of these presents decree and declare have pertained, and forever of right do belong and pertain, to the aforesaid king and to his successors and to the infante, and that the right of conquest which in the course of these letters we declare to be extended from the capes of Bojador and of Nã, as far as through all Guinea, and beyond toward that southern shore, has belonged and pertained, and forever of right belongs and pertains, to the said King Alfonso, his successors, and the infante, and not to any others. We also by the tenor of these presents decree and declare that King Alfonso and his successors and the infante aforesaid might and may, now and henceforth, freely and lawfully, in these [acquisitions] and concerning them make any prohibitions, statutes, and decrees whatsoever, even penal ones, and with imposition of any tribute, and dispose and ordain concerning them as concerning their own property and their other dominions. And in order to confer a more effectual right and assurance we do by these presents forever give, grant, and appropriate to the aforesaid King Alfonso and his successors, kings of the said kingdoms, and to the infante, the provinces, islands,

harbors, places, and seas whatsoever, how many soever, and of what sort soever they shall be, that have already been acquired and that shall hereafter come to be acquired, and the right of conquest also from the capes of Bojador and of Não aforesaid.

Moreover, since this is fitting in many ways for the perfecting of a work of this kind, we allow that the aforesaid King Alfonso and [his] successors and the infante, as also the persons to whom they, or any one of them, shall think that this work ought to be committed, may (according to the grant made to the said King John by Martin V., of happy memory, and another grant made also to King Edward of illustrious memory, king of the same kingdoms, father of the said King Alfonso, by Eugenius IV., of pious memory, Roman pontiffs, our predecessors) make purchases and sales of any things and goods and victuals whatsoever, as it shall seem fit, with any Saracens and infidels, in the said regions; and also may enter into any contracts, transact business, bargain, buy and negotiate, and carry any commodities whatsoever to the places of those Saracens and infidels, provided they be not iron instruments, wood to be used for construction, cordage, ships, or any kinds of armor, and may sell them to the said Saracens and infidels; and also may do, perform, or prosecute all other and singular things [mentioned] in the premises, and things suitable or necessary in relation to these; and that the same King Alfonso, his successors, and the infante, in the provinces, islands, and places already acquired, and to be acquired by him, may found and [cause to be] founded and built any churches, monasteries, or other pious places whatsoever; and also may send over to them any ecclesiastical persons whatsoever, as volunteers, both seculars, and regulars of any of the mendicant orders (with license, however, from their superiors), and that those persons may abide there as long as they shall live, and hear confessions of all who live in the said parts or who come thither, and after the confessions have been heard they may give due absolution in all cases, except those reserved to the aforesaid see, and enjoin salutary penance, and also administer the ecclesiastical sacraments freely and lawfully, and this we allow and grant to Alfonso himself, and his successors, the kings of Portugal, who shall come afterwards, and to the aforesaid infante. Moreover, we entreat in the Lord, and by the sprinkling of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom, as has been said, it concerneth, we exhort, and as they hope for the remission of their sins enjoin, and also by this perpetual edict of prohibition we more strictly inhibit, all and singular the faithful of Christ, ecclesiastics, seculars, and regulars of whatsoever orders, in whatsoever part of the world they live, and of whatsoever state, degree, order, condition, or pre-eminence they shall be, although endued with archiepiscopal, episcopal, imperial, royal, queenly, ducal, or any other greater ecclesiastical or worldly dignity, that they do not by any means presume to carry arms, iron, wood for construction, and other things prohibited by law from being in any way carried to the Saracens, to any of the provinces, islands, harbors, seas, and places whatsoever, acquired or possessed in the name of King Alfonso, or situated in this conquest or elsewhere, to the Saracens, infidels, or pagans; or even without special license from the said King Alfonso and his successors and the infante, to carry or cause to be carried merchandise and other things permitted by law, or to navigate or cause to be navigated those seas, or to fish in them, or to meddle with the provinces, islands, harbors, seas, and places, or any of them, or with this conquest, or to do anything by themselves or another or others, directly or indirectly, by deed or counsel, or to offer any obstruction whereby the aforesaid King Alfonso and his successors and the infante may be hindered from quietly enjoying their acquisitions and possessions, and prosecuting and carrying out this conquest.

And we decree that whosoever shall infringe these orders [shall incur the following penalties], besides the punishments pronounced by law against those who carry arms and other prohibited things to any of the Saracens, which we wish them to incur by so doing; if they be single persons, they shall incur the sentence of excommunication; if a community or corporation of a city, castle, village, or place, that city, castle, village, or place shall be thereby subject to the interdict; and we decree further that transgressors, collectively or individually, shall not be absolved from the sentence of excommunication, nor be able to obtain the relaxation of this interdict, by apostolic or any other authority, unless they shall first have made due satisfaction for their transgressions to Alfonso himself and his successors and to the infante, or shall have amicably agreed with them thereupon. By [these] apostolic writings we enjoin our venerable brothers, the archbishop of Lisbon,

and the bishops of Silves and Ceuta, that they, or two or one of them, by himself, or another or others, as often as they or any of them shall be required on the part of the aforesaid King Alfonso and his successors and the infante or any one of them, on Sundays, and other festival days, in the churches, while a large multitude of people shall assemble there for divine worship, do declare and denounce by apostolic authority that those persons who have been proved to have incurred such sentences of excommunication and interdict, are excommunicated and interdicted, and have been and are involved in the other punishments aforesaid. And we decree that they shall also cause them to be denounced by others, and to be strictly avoided by all, till they shall have made satisfaction for or compromised their transgressions as aforesaid. Offenders are to be held in check by ecclesiastical censure, without regard to appeal, the apostolic constitutions and ordinances and all other things whatsoever to the contrary notwithstanding. But in order that the present letters, which have been issued by us of our certain knowledge and after mature deliberation thereupon, as is aforesaid, may not hereafter be impugned by anyone as fraudulent, secret, or void, we will, and by the authority, knowledge, and power aforementioned, we do likewise by these letters, decree and declare that the said letters and what is contained therein cannot in any wise be impugned, or the effect thereof hindered or obstructed, on account of any defect of fraudulency, secrecy, or nullity, not even from a defect of the ordinary or of any other authority, or from any other defect, but that they shall be valid forever and shall obtain full authority. And if anyone, by whatever authority, shall, wittingly or unwittingly, attempt anything inconsistent with these orders we decree that his act shall be null and void. Moreover, because it would be difficult to carry our present letters to all places whatsoever, we will, and by the said authority we decree by these letters, that faith shall be given as fully and permanently to copies of them, certified under the hand of a notary public and the seal of the episcopal or any superior ecclesiastical court, as if the said original letters were exhibited or shown; and we decree that within two months from the day when these present letters, or the paper or parchment containing the tenor of the same, shall be affixed to the doors of the church at Lisbon, the sentences of excommunication and the other sentences contained therein shall bind all and singular offenders as fully as if these present letters had been made known and presented to them in person and lawfully. Therefore let no one infringe or with rash boldness contravene this our declaration, constitution, gift, grant, appropriation, decree, supplication, exhortation, injunction, inhibition, mandate, and will. But if anyone should presume to do so, be it known to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul. Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's, on the eighth day of January, in the year of the incarnation of our Lord one thousand four hundred and fifty-four, and in the eighth year of our pontificate.

P. de Noxeto.

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